



United States
Department of
Agriculture



Forest Service
Flathead
National Forest

Record of Decision

file



Forest Plan Flathead National Forest

RECORD OF DECISION

USDA FOREST SERVICE

**LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL
IMPACT STATEMENT FOR THE FLATHEAD NATIONAL FOREST**

**Flathead, Missoula, Lake, Powell, Lincoln, and
Lewis & Clark Counties, Montana**

January 1986

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INTRODUCTION

What is being decided?

The Record of Decision documents my decision and rationale for selecting Alternative 17 as the management strategy of the Flathead National Forest for the next 10 to 15 years. This strategy is contained in the document titled Forest Plan, Flathead National Forest, dated December 1985. The Forest Plan provides management area direction in the form of standards, guidelines, monitoring requirements, and a probable schedule of activities. The analysis of alternatives and public comments I considered in this decision can be found in the Environmental Impact Statement, dated December 1985.

What is the goal of the Forest Plan?

My goal in selecting Alternative 17 was to maximize net public benefit. In determining net public benefit, I considered public input, other agency and Indian Tribe goals, environmental quality, and resources you can place a dollar value on (priced) and those you cannot (nonpriced). I discuss how these factors were considered in my decision in the rationale section of this Record of Decision.

What will happen to existing plans on the Flathead National Forest?

Once adopted, the Forest Plan will replace all previous resource management plans, subject to existing rights, contracts, leases, and specific authorities for special area planning such as those related to Wilderness, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and National Recreation Trails.

What is the duration of the Forest Plan, and can it be changed?

The Forest Plan can be changed in two ways, amendment or revision, to respond to changing needs and opportunities, Congressional land designations, catastrophic events, monitoring results, or major new management or production technologies. The Forest Supervisor will follow amendment or revision procedures outlined in the National Forest Management Act and planning regulations (36 CFR Part 219.10(f)(g)), which include public notification and involvement. It will normally be revised every 10 years, but must be revised every 15 years.

What is not being decided?

Site-specific treatments and actions are not included. Site-specific analysis is provided for at the project level. The Forest Plan does not address administrative activities to carry on day-to-day management. For example, personnel matters, internal organization, and equipment and property management are not included. In this Record of Decision I am not making recommendations for those portions of contiguous roadless areas located on adjacent Forests. In addition, I am not making recommendations on oil and gas leasing, however the Forest Plan contains overall direction and stipulations for leasing.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, ISSUES, AND MANAGEMENT CONCERNS

Public involvement was basic to the development of Forest Plan issues and alternatives. A series of five public workshops during January 1980, resulted in the range of public issues. Subsequent public involvement was completed in 1983, during the roadless review. Over 500 people attended these meetings or submitted written comments.

The key issues and management concerns used in selecting the Forest Plan from the various alternatives are:

1. Which roadless areas or parts of roadless areas should be recommended for wilderness?
2. What should the sustained yield timber harvest level for the Flathead National Forest be, recognizing basic land productivity, economics, community stability, and other resource needs?
3. How much and what type of habitat should the Flathead National Forest provide for diverse fish and wildlife species, including those classified under the Endangered Species Act?
4. How shall Flathead National Forest roads be constructed, managed, and maintained to best meet resource needs within sound environmental, economic, and social considerations?
5. To what extent can the Flathead National Forest coordinate management activities on National Forest System lands with adjacent private lands to protect and maintain the quantity and quality of the water resource?
6. What are the visual management objectives for viewing areas within the Flathead National Forest?
7. Other areas of public interest were considered in selecting the Forest Plan. These concerns were dealt with through standards and guidelines applicable to all alternatives or as a part of the key issues. These are listed below:
 - recreation management
 - management of roadless areas not recommended for wilderness
 - level of wilderness trail maintenance
 - range management
 - timber harvesting techniques
 - timber utilization standards
 - oil and gas development
 - landownership adjustment
 - soil protection
 - fire management
 - mitigating insect and disease damage
 - monitoring and budget

ALTERNATIVES

Alternatives were developed to display the potential array of land management options and to provide analytical data to help you and me make comparisons and to determine the relative effects of various ways of addressing the issues. Development of alternatives started with a public workshop in September 1980. Interested individuals helped formulate the management goals by describing a wide range of management strategies. From these responses, the Forest planning team developed six alternatives, including Current Direction (Alternative 7). Another alternative developed in detail by a citizens' group became Alternative 5.

After analyzing the initial seven alternatives, an eighth alternative was developed. These eight alternatives were displayed in a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, which, along with a Proposed Forest Plan, were circulated for public review in March 1983.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement incorporated the decision made in the RARE II (Roadless Area Review and Evaluation) decision, which recommended no Flathead National Forest roadless areas for wilderness. Subsequently, a Ninth Circuit Court ruling (California vs. Block) found RARE II inadequate. This court ruling resulted in the Flathead National Forest having to issue a supplement to the Proposed Forest Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement which addressed the wilderness issue. In order to do this, the inventory of roadless areas was updated. This resulted in eight additional alternatives which examined a wide range of wilderness options. Analysis of all 16 alternatives resulted in identification of a new Preferred Alternative (Alternative 11) that recommended additional wilderness. This new information, along with guidelines for managing grizzly bear habitat, was released for public review and comment in a Draft Environmental Impact Statement Supplement in November 1984.

Analysis of public comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Draft Environmental Impact Statement Supplement produced additional information that caused me to make adjustments in Alternative 11. These adjustments led to the development of Alternative 17. I considered the significance of the information added by public comments and other sources and the changes made from Alternative 11 (the Preferred Alternative) disclosed in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement Supplement. I find that no significant new information has been added or substantial changes made. The changes between the Draft Environmental Impact Statement Supplement and Environmental Impact Statement are a result of public comments. I conclude that the magnitude of change from Alternative 11 to Alternative 17 was within the range of alternatives discussed and environmental effects disclosed in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Draft Environmental Impact Statement Supplement, and no further supplements to the Environmental Impact Statement are needed. A complete discussion of Alternative 17 is presented in the Environmental Impact Statement.

All alternatives that were addressed are briefly described below. More detailed information on alternatives can be found in Chapter II and in Appendix B of the Environmental Impact Statement.

ALTERNATIVE 1

This alternative emphasizes maintenance and enhancement of grizzly bear habitat, existing roadless areas, nongame wildlife, old growth, and fish habitat. Resources that provide revenue are emphasized only on the most productive lands.

ALTERNATIVE 2

Alternative 2 emphasizes people using National Forest System lands for resource development and recreation. This alternative places few restrictions on people's use of National Forest System lands.

ALTERNATIVE 3

Alternative 3 focuses on the Flathead National Forest's role in responding to local needs for recreation and timber. Timber is supplied at harvest levels of the last 10 years. Recreation is managed intensively for a variety of opportunities and big-game habitat management is emphasized to accommodate recreational hunting.

ALTERNATIVE 4

Alternative 4 emphasizes a high level of revenue to the Federal Treasury while maintaining the lowest costs possible. Resources that provide commodities are emphasized. Management is guided by economic criteria.

ALTERNATIVE 5

Alternative 5 emphasizes protective management in some areas of the Flathead National Forest where roadless and/or wildlife values are perceived to be highly significant. The Swan Mountain Range, the Le Beau area of the Tally Lake Ranger District, and the roadless portions of the North End of the Glacier View and Spotted Bear Ranger Districts would be managed for roadless recreation, watershed protection, and wildlife. In other areas, timber management would be emphasized. No additions to the existing National Wilderness Preservation System would be made, but future options would be preserved.

ALTERNATIVE 6

This alternative meets the direction in the President's "Statement of Policy," which states, "at least one alternative in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement will be developed to determine how the 1980 Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act program could best be implemented." In this alternative, National demand for forest resources is reflected in objectives assigned to the Flathead National Forest.

ALTERNATIVE 7

This alternative emphasizes current management direction as described by the Ranger District multiple-use plans and unit plans developed for portions of the Flathead National Forest. This alternative represents the "no action" alternative.

ALTERNATIVE 8

Alternative 8 was the Preferred Alternative in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. It was developed based on evaluation of the first seven alternatives. In recognition of the growing recreational industry, the alternative provides a high level of amenities, while offering an amount of timber consistent with recent harvest levels.

ALTERNATIVE 9

This alternative has resource objectives designed to maximize the wilderness resource and to provide the greatest amount of revenue for the least cost on nonwilderness lands. Management of resources that produce commodities is guided by economic criteria. Management for resources that do not produce commodities is minimal. All 495,000 acres of inventoried roadless lands are recommended for wilderness.

ALTERNATIVES 10 THROUGH 15

Alternative 10 is identical to Alternative 5 except that 197,000 acres are recommended for wilderness. Wilderness is recommended for roadless areas that have many recognized wilderness attributes.

Alternative 11 is identical to Alternative 8 except that it recommends 48,800 acres for wilderness. This was the Preferred Alternative in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement Supplement.

Alternatives 12 through 15 are based on Alternative 8, but recommend increasing amounts of wilderness.

- Alternative 12 recommends 82,400 acres in the Swan Front.
- Alternative 13 recommends 143,200 acres in the Swan Front and Swan Crest.
- Alternative 14 recommends 196,600 acres in the Swan Front, Swan Crest, and North End.
- Alternative 15 recommends 260,200 acres in the Swan Front, Swan Crest, North End, Young Nasukoin, Spotted Bear River, and South Fork Flathead River.

In Alternatives 12, 13, and 15, the nonwilderness lands are managed the same as those in Alternative 8. Alternative 14 has an additional objective of maintaining or increasing outputs of commodities on the nonwilderness lands.

ALTERNATIVE 16

This alternative is identical to Alternative 1 except that it recommends 374,000 acres for wilderness. It emphasizes management of grizzly bear habitat in nonwilderness through access restrictions, prescribed burning, and carefully designed timber harvest.

ALTERNATIVE 17

With the aid of public involvement, Alternative 17 evolved from Alternatives 8 and 11. It provides additional wilderness, recognizes the growing recreation industry, offers an amount of timber consistent with recent harvest levels, and emphasizes grizzly bear habitat management.

THE DECISION

I have decided to approve implementation of Alternative 17 to guide the management of the Flathead National Forest for the next 10 to 15 years. Alternative 17 establishes a basis to resolve several longstanding public issues on the Flathead National Forest.

Wilderness designation is recommended for 98,080 acres with high wilderness values. These values will be maintained pending Congressional action.

The first decade allowable sale quantity of 1 billion board feet is at harvest levels of the past 10 years. This is less than the 1.3 billion board feet that could be offered for sale under the current direction alternative. The annual program could range from 70 to 130 million board feet. I believe the mix of wood products offered for sale is consistent with the local industry demand. Of the 66,000 acres scheduled for harvest in the next 10 years, I have decided to offer for sale nearly 30,000 acres of lodgepole pine. Even-aged management will predominate, which includes shelterwood, seed tree, and clearcut silvicultural systems.

Management is designed to maintain habitat for all native wildlife species. The selected alternative provides for improving habitat for grizzly bear, gray wolf, and bald eagle, including the establishment of the Trail Creek Grizzly Bear Management Area. Improvements designed to facilitate the recovery of the grizzly bear and gray wolf will also benefit other wildlife species.

By 1995, habitat will be available to support an elk population of 5,500 animals. Recommendations from the Montana Cooperative Elk Logging Study will be incorporated into timber sales and transportation planning. Old-growth habitat will have been reduced, but will be well above that required to sustain populations of species that are dependent on old growth. Fish habitat outside of wilderness will be available to support a 15 percent increase in fish population. This will result from reduced sediment and improved fish habitat.

Approximately 500 additional miles of roads will be needed to achieve the multiple-use objectives specified in Alternative 17. They will be low standard local roads. The total miles of road open for traffic will be decreased from current levels for the benefit of wildlife. The road management program, employing Best Management Practices and aggressive revegetation, will minimize sediment to streams and maintain the high quality of water.

Visual quality objectives are incorporated in the objectives of each management area. Areas of high scenic value such as Noisy Face, are managed to maintain existing landscape. A diversity of recreation opportunities provide for growth in the tourist industry and contribute to a high quality Montana lifestyle.

This is not the end of the planning process, change will be needed in the future. Improved information and continued public participation will provide a foundation on which to build systematic and reasoned changes. A sound and achievable monitoring program is a part of the Forest Plan. Evaluation of monitored activities is an important part of the management control system. This information will be made public and will provide an opportunity for interested groups and individuals to make their own assessments of our success or failure.

RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

The factors I used to determine which alternative maximizes net public benefit include response to issues, concerns, and opportunities; environmental quality; economic efficiency; and compatibility with other agency and Indian Tribe goals. In making this decision, I recognize the limitations of the physical and biological systems, and that the Flathead National Forest cannot provide everything each individual or group would like. My reasoning for making this decision follows:

Response to Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities

1. Issue: Which roadless areas or parts of roadless areas should be recommended for wilderness?

Public response made it very clear that wilderness designation was an issue on the Flathead National Forest. Some people and groups felt that roadless lands are a vanishing resource and need to be preserved through wilderness classification. Others oppose additional wilderness because of conflicts with nonwilderness recreation and the loss of opportunities to produce commodities. The challenge was to propose for wilderness, those areas with the highest wilderness values, and to maintain opportunities for nonwilderness recreation and commodity uses on other lands. I carefully considered priced and nonpriced benefits from both a National and local perspective, along with public comments, previous legislative proposals, and the analysis contained in the Environmental Impact Statement. My recommendations pertain only to those roadless areas on the Flathead National Forest. Decisions on roadless areas shared by other National Forests are contained in the Record of Decision of the respective National Forest. My recommendations for the primary roadless areas receiving public support and consideration for wilderness recommendation follow:

Swan Front

The Swan Front has the highest wilderness value and, I sense, the most public support for wilderness designation of the Flathead National Forest's roadless areas. I am recommending a total of 54,815 acres of the Swan Front, from Holland Lake to Bunker Creek, be designated by Congress as an addition to the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

This recommendation includes 11,148 acres north of Inspiration Point, primarily in the Bunker Creek drainage, not recommended in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement Supplement. This is similar to the recommendations by Governor Schwinden and the wilderness legislation proposed by the Montana Congressional Delegation in 1984. I feel that designation of this area is needed to resolve the wilderness issue. Designation provides the security component of grizzly bear habitat and will not conflict with habitat improvement projects planned in the Bunker Creek management area.

Steep slopes, resulting in excessive logging costs, severely limit the commercial timber potential of the Swan Front. Discussion with the minerals industry has suggested the area has a relatively low potential for oil and gas production. It is my opinion that little commodity production will be lost along the Swan Front.

I am not recommending wilderness classification for any of the Swan Front roadless area from Bunker Creek to Six Mile Mountain. I believe this area is best suited to a roadless recreation management emphasis. It is a relatively narrow area adjacent to lands managed for wood products and mule deer and elk winter habitat. I think potential user and resource conflicts are too high to recommend wilderness.

East South Fork Flathead River

This area includes roadless lands along the boundary of the Great Bear and Bob Marshall Wildernesses. I am recommending the 5,187 acre Limestone Caves area for wilderness because it contributes to the Bob Marshall Wilderness and is well suited for primitive recreation and wilderness use. I believe the remaining East South Fork Flathead River roadless areas are better suited for mule deer and elk winter habitat, roadless recreation, and timber.

Middle Fork Flathead River

This area includes several small roadless areas bordering the north end of the Great Bear Wilderness. I am recommending 6,295 acres near Slippery Bill Mountain for wilderness. This area is an integral part of the Bob Marshall-Great Bear-Scapegoat Wilderness Complex, and has outstanding scenic and primitive recreation values. It also has low potential for commodity benefits for the same reasons as discussed for the Swan Front.

I believe the remaining roadless areas in the Middle Fork Flathead River, which are less consolidated, will be difficult to manage for wilderness and, therefore, will be managed for nonwilderness resources and uses.

Swan Crest

The heart of the Swan Crest is the Jewel Basin Hiking Area, with 28 alpine lakes, many picturesque mountain streams, meadows, rocky peaks, subalpine vegetation, and a variety of wildlife species. I am recommending the 15,368 acre Jewel Basin Hiking Area, plus 16,415 acres of adjacent lands, for wilderness. I believe the area has outstanding wilderness qualities, and even though the area was adequately managed as a hiking area, designation would add to the feeling of permanent protection that many people seek for the area. The tradeoffs are not very significant since much of the area was already managed as a hiking area.

Alternative 17 provides semiprimitive motorized recreation of high quality on much of the remainder of the Swan Crest. Lower elevations have productive tree-growing sites and big-game winter habitat, and I believe management for these valuable resources provides the greatest public benefits.

North End Roadless Areas

Of the many important resources in these areas, I consider the grizzly bear the most important. Grizzly bear population densities are among the highest known in the lower 48 States. Many of the existing grizzly bear habitat components are the result of fire. Plant succession will reduce the effectiveness of this habitat in the future. Vegetation management will be needed to retain the current condition. I believe management emphasis on grizzly bear habitat and research in a nonwilderness setting will provide the best opportunities to manage the vegetation and provide grizzly bear habitat. The Mt. Hefty, Tuchuck, and Thompson Seton areas are proposed for administrative classification as part of the Trail Creek Grizzly Bear Management Area.

Other roadless areas were evaluated in the Environmental Impact Statement. They were recommended for nonwilderness uses to meet objectives for timber, recreation, and wildlife (Environmental Impact Statement, pages II-74 through II-80). Overall, the roadless areas will be managed to emphasize the following:

Wilderness	98,080
Dispersed Recreation/Amenity	188,054
Wildlife	88,411
Timber	118,735
Other	<u>2,150</u>
	495,430

2. Issue: What the sustained yield timber harvest level for the Flathead National Forest should be, recognizing basic land productivity, economics, community stability, and other resource needs.

The timber issue is the most controversial because of its relationship to all other forest resources and uses. People have highly opposing views on timber harvest. Some people view use of the timber resource as being compatible with other forest resources and that harvesting timber is in the public interest. Others believe timber harvest is generally detrimental to other forest resources and that timber harvests should be few in number or even eliminated altogether. In addition, I recognize timber industry's desire to have more timber offered in the next 10 years. I also understand that the amount of timber coming from private industrial land will not continue as it has during the last decade. Timber processing is Flathead County's largest basic industry and about 50 percent of the wood fiber comes from the Flathead National Forest, thus the Forest plays a key role in the economy of the Flathead Valley.

I evaluated alternatives that offered sale quantities in excess of the past 10-year average. These alternatives have the potential to adversely affect the environment and those resources that do not produce revenue more than I desire. On the other hand, I evaluated alternatives that offered less timber in favor of other resources. I feel these alternatives did not provide an adequate amount of timber for sale to support this important segment of the local economy.

Given the available timber supply and environmental considerations in Alternative 17, I am confident that adverse economic or environmental consequences will not result. I believe this decision maximizes net public benefit. The amount of timber actually offered for sale each year may vary between 70 and 130 million board feet, depending on demand and timber available.

In the past, the value of timber sold has generally exceeded costs. I expect this situation will continue in the future. It may be necessary at times to incur below-cost timber sales in some locations to achieve long-term resource management objectives.

Along with the amount of timber offered for sale, people expressed an interest in the methods used to manage the trees. There are two basic ways to manage timber stands on the Flathead National Forest, even-aged and uneven-aged.

I have decided it is important to increase the amount of lodgepole pine offered for sale in the next 10 years to reduce fire hazard and risk to other ownerships, to create a variable age class distribution and to capture the value of these trees. Even-aged management accomplishes these objectives and creates future stands that are less susceptible to Mountain Pine Beetle.

Uneven-aged management generally provides continuous tree cover, resulting in less apparent visual change and hiding cover for some wildlife species. However, uneven-aged management requires frequent logging entries over a larger area of land to attain the same volume. It is my opinion that minimizing disturbance to wildlife is more important than continuous tree cover. However, in riparian areas continuous cover is important to terrestrial and aquatic species and uneven-aged management will be used in riparian areas.

I believe even-aged management is appropriate for the majority of the vegetative types on the Flathead National Forest because it produces the environment that most native vegetation require. It is for these reasons even-aged management will be the most widely used method.

3. Issue: How much and what type of habitat the Flathead National Forest should provide for diverse fish and wildlife species, including those classified under the Endangered Species Act.

Some people commented that the Proposed Forest Plan did not do enough to protect fish and wildlife resources and others thought it was overprotective. I believe the wildlife and fish resources of the Flathead National Forest are components of the lifestyle and quality of life expected by people.

The recovery of species listed as threatened or endangered is important. The grizzly bear, gray wolf, and bald eagle are species of National significance. All of the alternatives considered grizzly bear and gray wolf recovery. Alternatives 1, 9, and 16 project more grizzly bear than Alternative 17 by the end of the first decade; Alternatives 1 and 16 project less than the 1 billion board feet I feel is needed to maintain community stability; and Alternative 9 projects lower elk populations by 1995.

Based on public comment, Forest-wide standards in Chapter II of the Forest Plan have been strengthened to include grizzly bear and gray wolf guidelines, and additional direction for the protection of bald eagles has been added. The proposed Trail Creek Grizzly Bear Management Area was well received by many groups and individuals. It has been expanded in Alternative 17 and removed from the suitable timber base. The Proposed Forest Plan Supplement (Alternative 11) received a nonjeopardy opinion from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The grizzly bear and gray wolf guidelines in the Forest Plan were developed in cooperation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Subsequent changes reflected in Alternative 17 were coordinated with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who confirmed that the nonjeopardy opinion for Alternative 11 would apply to Alternative 17.

Alternatives 1, 4, 5, 10, and 16 project higher populations of nonwilderness catchable trout than Alternative 17. These alternatives do not produce the 1 billion board feet that I feel is necessary to maintain community stability (Table 1). However, Alternative 17 provides habitat to support a 15 percent increase in nonwilderness catchable trout plus 1 billion board feet of timber.

Alternatives 1 and 7 project higher elk populations by 1995 than Alternative 17. However, Alternative 1 reduces the allowable sale quantity and Alternative 7 has the second lowest projected fish population (Table 1).

Alternative 17 has one of the highest old-growth habitat potentials at elevations below 5,000 feet. Alternatives 5 and 10 have comparable old-growth habitat potential. These alternatives reduce the allowable sale quantity.

Based on the analysis and public comments, I believe Alternative 17 provides a high overall wildlife and fish program.

4. **Issue: How Flathead National Forest roads should be constructed, managed, and maintained to best meet resource needs within sound environmental, economic, and social considerations.**

There seems to be more agreement among various interest groups and individuals on the need for aggressive road management than any other issue. Comments received indicate people perceive road building as an independent objective of Forest planning. This is a misunderstanding. The road mileages displayed in the Environmental Impact Statement depend on the miles of roads needed to manage timber and provide access for recreation and administration.

Some of these effects were discussed in the timber and wildlife issue. In response to security needs of wildlife, the total miles of roads open for travel will be decreased during the next 10 years. This will include closing some existing and most new roads to public access during a part of the year or yearlong. People cite the adverse effects of roads on wildlife security and fish habitat as their main concern. Alternative 17 establishes explicit objectives for road management and standards for road planning, construction, and maintenance that I believe will result in the resource protection people want, while achieving multiple-use benefits.

5. **Issue: What extent the Flathead National Forest can coordinate management activities on National Forest System lands with adjacent private lands to protect and maintain the quantity and quality of the water resource.**

People expressed concern regarding overall water quality regardless of landownership, I share this concern.

I believe Alternative 17 responds to this overall water quality concern. The Forest Plan includes explicit standards, called "Best Management Practices," to protect water quality. It sets clear direction that State water quality laws and standards will be met. Alternative 17 is a change from past management direction, including more riparian protection, sediment mitigation measures, and greater monitoring emphasis. New road construction will be primarily low standard "truck trails" designed for intermittent use, compared to the high standard roads constructed during the last three decades. In addition, I expect the Forest Supervisor to continue to coordinate actions with other landownerships in order to minimize adverse effects on overall water quality.

Comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement indicated people thought the Proposed Forest Plan posed unacceptable risk to water quality and fisheries. Guidelines and models were developed to predict changes in water yield and sediment due to forest management activities. Public comments criticized these models as being unverified. The use of these models was discontinued and a Regional method was adopted. This method estimates relative sediment risk based on miles of road, acres of timber harvest by landtype, and projected livestock grazing. Changing to this new method was coordinated with the Montana Department of Health and Environmental Sciences, Water Quality Bureau.

I believe the direction contained in the Forest Plan provides for the protection of water quality and will lead to overall improvement of the water resource.

6. **Issue: What the visual management objectives for viewing areas within the Flathead National Forest should be.**

Public comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement ranged from one extreme to the other, that the Preferred Alternative was overemphasizing visual quality and that it was underestimating and not protecting it.

I recognize that scenic values are important to both local residents and to the visitors that contribute to the Flathead Valley's economy. I further recognize the importance of maintaining a high level of scenic beauty around the Flathead Valley and along major travel and recreation corridors. Of special concern to local residents and the Forest Service is the Swan Mountain Range (known locally as Noisy Face), which forms the scenic backdrop on the east side of the Flathead Valley.

Alternative 17 responds to this issue by changing the intent of management to emphasize visual quality, recreation, and wildlife values on Noisy Face using timber management as a tool to achieve these objectives. This represents a change from past management direction which emphasized timber production. I believe Alternative 17 resolves the conflicts in critical viewing areas while protecting landscape values at a reasonable cost.

7. **Other important issues and concerns responded to in development of the Selected Alternative are:**

Maintaining a Wide Range of Recreation Opportunities

It is part of the Forest Service's multiple-use management philosophy to provide a wide range of recreation opportunities, emphasizing recreation the forest is most suited to offering. Recreation opportunities provided by Alternative 17 range from a primitive wilderness to a developed campground with road access. Opportunities in semiprimitive settings, for both motorized and nonmotorized recreation, are also important and provided.

Riparian Area and Fish Habitat Management

Management of riparian areas and fish habitat is a part of the water quality issue. Alternative 17 will have a beneficial effect on fish habitat when compared with past management. Some people thought that the expectations for fish habitat improvements were unrealistically high. I believe the improvements specified for fish habitat in Alternative 17 represent a good investment and are needed to maximize net public benefit. It is my opinion that past improvement programs for fisheries habitat have been inadequate, and will be corrected as a result of my approval of Alternative 17.

The Environmental Impact Statement's projections of fish populations are useful in comparing the effects of alternatives on fish habitat. These projections are based on the best information available, but the numbers presented have unknown statistical reliability and are not meant to be predictions of actual populations. The Selected Alternative requires improved water quality and fish habitat monitoring and evaluation.

Environmental Quality

Environmental quality was a consideration in my selecting Alternative 17. I considered environmental consequences of the various alternatives. Air quality will be maintained within legal limits and water quality will meet State water quality standards. Soil erosion will be minimized and long-term soil productivity will be maintained. Fish and wildlife population potentials will be maintained and timber harvest, road construction and oil and gas activities will be designed to minimize adverse effects on wildlife, especially threatened and endangered species. Forest management will improve the health, vigor, and diversity of the forest and will reduce the risk of insect and disease epidemics and catastrophic wildfire.

The management standards developed to protect environmental quality are displayed in Chapter II of the Forest Plan. These standards do not vary by alternative. The standards provide the specific direction and mitigation measures to assure long-term productivity is not impaired by the application of short-term management practices. These consequences will be monitored.

The adverse effects that cannot be avoided are identified by resource in Chapter IV of the Environmental Impact Statement. Although the application of Forest-wide Standards are intended to limit the number and duration of these adverse effects, increases in sedimentation and short-term reductions in air quality are associated to some extent with all alternatives.

Consideration of all these factors, while comparing the alternative outputs, led me to selecting Alternative 17. I feel Alternative 17 improves the environmental quality of the Flathead National Forest over Current Direction.

Economic Efficiency

In determining the most economically efficient alternative, the Forest Service uses an estimate of present net value, which is the difference between discounted benefits and discounted costs. In calculating present net value, a dollar value is assigned to various outputs. Some of these are determined by the market such as timber, and produce a revenue. Others such as recreation, use assigned values

derived from research and generally do not produce a revenue. However, some resources that do not produce revenue have no basis from which to estimate a value, as in the case of grizzly bear; therefore, present net value cannot be the only criterion used in selecting the Forest Plan. The criterion used was the maximization of net public benefit, which includes both the net value of resources that produce revenue and consideration of those that do not produce revenue.

In making my decision, I felt it was necessary to evaluate how opportunities would change by selecting alternatives with varying combinations of these two types of resources. This helped me understand the interactions occurring between resources in determining net public benefit. Table 1 displays each alternative arranged in order of decreasing present net value. It also shows estimated outputs for a select group of priced and nonpriced resources which relate to the key issues used in selecting the Forest Plan. Details of how present net value and other outputs are calculated for alternatives are described in Appendix B of the Environmental Impact Statement.

TABLE 1 Comparisons of Alternatives - Flathead National Forest

Alternative	PNV (MM\$)		Timber**	Elk**	Grizzly	Fish**	Wilder-	VQO
/Benchmark	Actual	Change*	(MMBF)	(No.)	Bear	(M)	ness	(M acres)
					(No.)		(M acres)	(M acres)
Max PNV	606	--	103	4,486	184	532	1,070	356
6 <i>RPA</i>	578	28	145	4,510	191	430	1,070	69
7 <i>current</i>	533	45	132	5,928	190	432	1,070	329
9	513	20	103	4,060	212	530	1,565	129
12	505	8	100	4,749	201	542	1,152	440
13	504	1	100	4,646	202	541	1,213	385
14	503	1	100	4,646	202	541	1,267	383
10	502	1	80	5,092	195	567	1,267	335
11 <i>but PNV</i>	499	3	100	4,762	201	544	1,119	458
15	498	1	99	4,588	202	545	1,330	347
2	495	3	116	5,417	190	448	1,070	195
4	494	1	51	4,892	152	563	1,070	195
8	493	1	100	4,760	200	542	1,070	392
3	490	3	101	4,990	197	544	1,070	464
5 <i>current</i>	489	1	82	5,158	195	567	1,070	321
17 <i>slow</i>	483	6	100	5,503	205	548	1,168	410
1	477	6	82	5,625	215	577	1,070	319
16	467	10	71	4,774	216	579	1,444	275

* Decrease from previous alternative

** Decade 1 values

M = Thousand

MM = Million

VQO = Visual Quality Objective of retention or partial retention

PNV = Present Net Value

The following discussion presents the present net value tradeoffs among alternatives:

PNV - Tradeoffs, Alternative 6

Alternative 6 has the highest present net value of all alternatives, with corresponding high outputs of timber, grazing, and motorized and developed recreation. In order to produce these levels of revenue producing benefits, grizzly bear, elk habitat, wilderness, visual quality, and water quality and fisheries were judged to be at such a level as to make Alternative 6 inadequate in responding to public issues. Alternative 6 is inadequate in maximizing net public benefits even though \$28 million in present net value is traded off compared to the PNV Benchmark. This tradeoff is primarily because of the objective for high timber output over the next 10 years. Alternative 17 has a lower present net value than Alternative 6 because it produces more elk, grizzly bear, water quality and fish, wilderness, and visual quality.

PNV - Tradeoffs, Alternative 7

Alternative 7 (Current Direction) has the second highest present net value among alternatives for reasons similar to Alternative 6. The reduction of \$45 million compared to Alternative 6 is because of increased outputs and costs associated with wildlife habitat, visual quality, and less cost-efficient timber management. Net public benefits are not maximized by Current Direction because of inadequate outputs of grizzly bear habitat potential and inadequate response to public issues. Current Direction has high timber production goals which conflict in critical public issue areas such as Noisy Face, Trail Creek, and Bunker Creek. Alternative 7 has a large output of winter forage due to intensive timber harvest on winter habitat in Decade 1 resulting in a high elk potential index. Tradeoffs for high timber and elk outputs include water quality and fisheries, elk, grizzly bear and gray wolf security, visual quality, and roadless/wilderness values. These are the issues identified as indicators of a need for change, and the issues which I believe Alternative 17 successfully resolves.

PNV - Tradeoffs, Alternative 9

Alternative 9 is based on the maximum present net value benchmark, except the entire 495,000 acre roadless inventory is assigned to wilderness management. Alternative 9 has the third highest present net value, exceeded only by Alternatives 6 and 7. The difference of \$93 million compared to the PNV Benchmark is a result of reduced revenue-producing benefits, primarily in timber and recreation outputs as a result of reduced suitable timber base and reduced recreation capacity below projected use levels. I think Alternative 9 places extreme emphasis on wilderness and economic efficiency that results in inadequate response to public issues. The relatively high present net value of Alternative 9 is due to the significantly reduced costs in all areas except timber. I think the lower present net value of Alternative 17 is a necessary tradeoff for achieving elk habitat, water quality and fish habitat, recreational and wildlife habitat diversity, and visual quality objectives.

PNV - Tradeoffs, Alternatives 10 through 15

These alternatives were designed to evaluate the tradeoffs for a wide range of wilderness options. The present net value changes are relatively small between these alternatives, with the total change in present net value (from Alternative 12 with the highest to Alternative 15 with the lowest) amounting to only \$15 million, or about 2.5 percent of the PNV Benchmark. The change in present net value of these alternatives is relatively small because the major differences are in resources that do not produce a revenue and are not measured by present net value. All these alternatives have a higher present net value than Alternative 17 because Alternative 17 produces more elk, grizzly bear, nongame habitat, lodgepole pine timber harvest, and resolves local land-use issues such as Noisy Face, Trail Creek, and wilderness.

PNV - Tradeoffs, Alternatives 2 through 5 and Alternative 8

Alternatives 2 through 5 examined a wide range of alternative land uses and resource management plans with relatively large changes in the mix of benefits while holding wilderness at current levels. The net effect of these alternative strategies results in relatively small changes in present net value. The major differences among these alternatives deals with responsiveness to public issues, often in specific geographic areas with significant differences in outputs and costs. On a Forest-wide basis, these changes in benefits and costs are offsetting so that significant changes in public benefits are not measured by changes in present net value. As a result of evaluating tradeoffs among these alternatives in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Alternative 3 appeared to come the closest to maximizing net public benefits. Evaluation of the data indicated improvements were needed. An alternative was needed that provided more grizzly bear habitat potential than Alternative 3, but less than Alternative 1, and one that reduced the cost of visual quality management. Alternative 8 was formulated in response to this initial evaluation.

Timber harvest is constrained by grizzly bear habitat management objectives, visual quality objectives, big-game winter habitat, and riparian management. These objectives place constraints on economically optimal timber harvest considerably higher than the PNV Benchmark. Alternative 8 had a present net value increase of \$3 million when compared to Alternative 3 as a result of reducing visual quality objectives in most areas of suitable timberlands. Alternative 8 was selected as the Preferred Alternative in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, and appeared to best maximize public benefits. The tradeoff of \$1 million less present net value than Alternative 4 is due to providing timber outputs in Decade 1 nearer to historic levels in consideration of community stability and due to costs of providing improved grizzly bear habitat and recreation opportunities. The tradeoff of \$2 million less than Alternative 2 is primarily due to the costs of providing improved grizzly bear and other wildlife habitat, water quality, and additional recreation opportunities. Alternative 17 trades off present net value to provide improved elk habitat, riparian and snag-dependent wildlife habitat, grizzly bear and gray wolf potential, and resolution of the wilderness issue by making wilderness recommendations.

Alternative 17 foregoes additional present net value by increasing the sale of beetle-killed lodgepole pine in the next 10 years. Present net value is reduced because lodgepole pine has a lower value resulting from higher costs of logging, sale preparation, reforestation, and the lower value of the wood itself. I have decided to increase the amount of lodgepole pine offered for sale to reduce fire hazard and risk to other ownerships, to create a variable age class distribution in lodgepole pine, and to capture the value in these trees.

I believe the Selected Alternative represents the best mix of resource benefits necessary to maximize net public benefit.

Compatibility with Other Public Agency and Indian Tribe Goals

Extensive efforts were made to ensure that the Selected Alternative considered the goals of other public agencies and of Indian tribes. Twelve plans of other agencies were reviewed. Forty-three coordination meetings were conducted with officials from other agencies. Five meetings were conducted with Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribe representatives and one with the Blackfeet Tribe (see Chapter VI and Appendix A of the Environmental Impact Statement for details).

I believe Alternative 17 is compatible and complimentary to the goals of other agencies and Indian Tribes. The National Park Service (Glacier National Park) and the Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribe (Flathead Reservation) are the major land management entities adjacent to the Flathead National Forest. The Mission Mountains Wilderness is compatible with a Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribal wilderness designation on a major shared boundary along the crest of the Mission Mountains. The lands designated Wild and Scenic River provide a transition between Glacier National Park and the Flathead National Forest. Glacier National Park's primary mission is to preserve the natural landscape, a mission that the Flathead National Forest shares as a principle of multiple use. Coordination with Glacier National Park and the Indian tribes will continue as projects are implemented.

I believe the Selected Alternative will permit the Flathead National Forest to contribute to the achievement of the various goals of the State of Montana. The Forest Plan has been developed in close cooperation with the State of Montana. Concerns expressed by Governor Schwinden on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement have been responded to in the Selected Alternative. Diverse opportunities are provided to contribute to the Build Montana program for the recreation and tourism as well as the industrial sectors.

High levels of wildlife habitat are provided along with increased emphasis on water quality and fisheries enhancement that will contribute to achieving State fish and wildlife goals. I recognize the State's concern about the allowable sale quantity being lower than Current Direction. Although my decision reflects a change in the allowable sale quantity from previous plans, I believe the Selected Alternative provides timber sales that will be adequate to meet the demand in the decade ahead.

COMPARISON OF THE ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE AND SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

Alternative 16 represents the environmentally preferred alternative since it provides the least physical and biological change among alternatives. Under Alternative 16, 70 percent of the Flathead National Forest would be managed with little or no man-induced changes to the biological or physical environment. Additional wilderness would be recommended for 374,000 acres, and another 164,000 acres would be managed for roadless recreation.

Management under Alternative 16 would focus on amenities such as grizzly bear, riparian values, and water quality. Alternative 16 projects the second lowest timber harvest level.

This emphasis on wilderness and grizzly bear results in a reduction of 290 million board feet of timber offered for sale in the next 10 years and a reduction in the elk potential. I believe these reductions are undesirable.

Even though Alternative 16 is preferable from the standpoint of the physical and biological environment, I believe Alternative 17 provides for a better mix of management emphases and maximizes the net public benefit while protecting the environment.

IMPLEMENTATION, MITIGATION, AND MONITORING

Implementation

Implementation of the Forest Plan will begin 30 days after the Notice of Availability of the Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision appear in the Federal Register (36 CFR 219.10 (c) (1)).

Implementation requires moving from an existing land-use management program with a budget and schedule of activities, to the level of management outlined in the Forest Plan. In areas where management activities have already been imposed, some period of adjustment may be required to attain Forest Plan goals and objectives. However, as soon as practicable the Forest Supervisor will ensure that, subject to valid existing rights, all projects and contractual obligations are consistent with the Forest Plan. The Forest Supervisor has authority to change the implementation schedule to reflect differences between proposed annual budgets and actual appropriated funds. Such scheduled changes are considered an amendment to the Forest Plan, but are not considered a significant amendment, or require the preparation of an environmental impact statement, unless the changes significantly alter the long-term relationships between levels of multiple-use goods and services projected under planned budget proposals as compared to those projected under actual appropriations (36 CFR 219.10 (e)).

Implementation activities related to the key issues are:

Approximately 98,080 acres of roadless area have been recommended for wilderness. The recommendation for wilderness designation is a preliminary administrative one which will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President prior to a final recommendation to Congress. Decisions on wilderness designation reside with the Congress. Areas not designated as wilderness revert to the management area and direction as specified in the Forest Plan.

Implementation will likely result in some individual timber sales having a negative cash flow when all costs are considered in relation to revenues received from the first entry timber harvest. These sales are referred to as "below-cost" timber sales. Analysis indicates some of these sales will be necessary to achieve short-term and long-term objectives to maximize net public benefits. Construction of roads to access unroaded stands is the primary reason for the first decade negative cash flow.

Minimizing below-cost timber sales will receive high priority in the implementation and budgeting process and in the designing and scheduling of timber sales. Cost-efficient management requires that cash flow analyses be evaluated to minimize negative cash flow projects (Forest Plan, Chapter V, page 6, and Forest Service Manual 2430). Region 1 policy states (2430 letter dated April 19, 1985):

2. (a) An area timber harvesting economic assessment will be made when sales are planned for an undeveloped area.
- (b) An area assessment should be made for other developed or partially developed areas when previous sales have shown substantial economic problems.
- (c) A feasibility analysis of each sale over 1 million board feet will be made to assure it has been designed with the most cost-effective measures possible in keeping with environmental concerns.

Implementation includes official designation of the Trail Creek Grizzly Bear Management Area and the use of prescribed fire to enhance grizzly bear habitat. Improvement will be monitored closely and validated by research. Fish and wildlife habitat management activities will be completed as scheduled.

Improved road management has already been initiated as an extension of Current Direction. Forest travel regulations are being revised and will become an appendix to the Forest Plan upon completion. A recently completed analysis of roads concluded they are being overbuilt and recommended reducing standards and costs. An interdisciplinary team is currently reviewing methods of managing timber on steep slopes with fewer roads. As roads are a large part of the potential stream sedimentation problem, implementation will include a watershed analysis prior to significant project-level activity.

The Limits of Acceptable Change process will help establish direction for management of recreational activities within Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River corridors.

Mitigation

Implementation is guided by the Forest-wide management standards located in Chapter II of the Forest Plan, and by the specific management area prescriptions and requirements addressed in Chapter III of the Forest Plan. The management standards were developed through an interdisciplinary effort and contain measures necessary to mitigate or eliminate any long-term adverse environmental effects. Additional mitigation measures and management standards are discussed in the various appendices to the Forest Plan. To the best of my knowledge, all practical mitigation measures have been adopted and are included in the Forest Plan.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation comprise the management control system for the Forest Plan. It will provide you and me with information on the progress and results of implementation. This information and evaluation will provide feedback into the Forest planning process for potential future change.

Table V-1 in the Forest Plan displays the basic outline of the monitoring process. An annual monitoring program, developed in accordance with this outline, will be prepared as part of the Flathead National Forest's annual work program. A detailed program for water quality and fish habitat monitoring (1986 to 1995) was prepared in April of 1985, and is part of the Forest planning records. Similar detailed programs will be prepared for all resources and activities requiring monitoring. These programs will be based on funds available. If funds are inadequate to properly monitor the Forest Plan goals and objectives, an analysis will be made to develop a further course of action. This may include Forest Plan amendment or revision, or dropping projects.

The results and trends of monitoring described in the annual monitoring report will be evaluated and summarized annually. An evaluation report will be prepared at least every 5 years.

PLANNING RECORDS

Planning records contain the detailed information and decisions used in developing the Forest Plan and Environmental Impact Statement as required in 36 CFR 219.12.

All of the documentation chronicling the Forest planning process are available for inspection during regular business hours at:

Forest Supervisor's Office
Flathead National Forest
1935 Third Avenue East
P. O. Box 147
Kalispell, Montana 59903-0147
(406) 755-5401

These records are incorporated by reference into the Environmental Impact Statement and Forest Plan.

APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 211.18. Notice of appeal must be in writing and submitted to:

James C. Overbay, Regional Forester
Northern Region
U.S.D.A. Forest Service
P. O. Box 7669
Missoula, Montana 59807

Notice of appeal must be submitted within 45 days from the date of this decision or within 30 days after publication by the Environmental Protection Agency of the Notice of Availability of the Environmental Impact Statement and Forest Plan, whichever date is later. A statement of reasons to support the appeal and any request for oral presentation must be filed within the 45-day period for filing a notice of appeal.



JAMES C. OVERBAY
Regional Forester

January 22, 1986
Date